MODERN HINDU SOCIETY

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The identity of a society is determined by its basic features. In the case of the Hindu Society these features have been the belief in the theory of Karman and that of rebirth, Punarjanma, a corollary to the former which means reaping the reward of actions, good or bad, ~~done in~~ previous birth/births. The cycle of birth and rebirth continues till the true knowledge in the form of the identity of the individuals soul, the jīvātman, with the supreme one, the Paramātman dawns. Except the Materialists known as the Cārvākas or Lokāyatikas, every school and every sect of Hindu Society has belief in Karman and rebirth. Not only the Hindus, even as of the other religions, ~~all of them without any exceptions,~~ as had their origin in India, as reform movements, the religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and so on have absolute faith in them. At the social plane, the caste system and the system of the stages of life, the Varnāśrama-dharma, have been the essential characteristics of Hindu society which was divided into four groups of Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras in the descending order of ~~their~~ importance. The Brahmins formed the intellectuals, the Kṣatriyas the warriors, the Vaiśyas the merchants and

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FEDERATION OF INDIAN CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

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traders and the Śūdras the various other professions and the menials. In course of time this division primarily conceived on the basis of the type of work and activity to be performed by each came to be determined by birth, the real control vesting with the first three upper groups, the last group having been assigned the lowest position and being totally neglected and looked down upon. Among the three groups the Brahmin with ~~all~~ and lores his knowledge of the Scriptures ~~and with~~ occupied the dominant position. A challenge was thrown to this by a long line of reformers down the ages, some of which were with their own set of ideas, accepted by their followers as new religions and named after them Buddhism for example after the Buddha and Jainism after Jina Mahavira. The reformers in their own way continued trying to demolish the castle barriers. the barriers of high and low with only limited success which not unoften resulted in their followers forming break away groups leaving the care of the Hindu society continue with the system wherein a large segment of it for no reason except its birth in a particular group was considered untouchable and unfit for anything decent in life and was condemned to a living deprived of facilities

available to the members of the other three groups.

The special prerogative of the Brahmins, the ritual too held society in its firm grip and assured for its performers a special position. The protest movements aimed at loosening its grip but without much spectacular success.

~~The~~ women who were equal partners in society and shared the same altar with their husbands even in the performance of the sacrifice in the Vedic period and who joined in the highly philosophical discussions in the period of the Upanisads came to occupy a much lower position in society later. They were denied the study of the scriptures : strī śūdrau nādhīyātām, the woman and the Śudra, must not read them, and till the beginning of the present century even the formal education. From the ancient to the medieval and from the medieval to the early modern period the position of women is a saga of progressive deterioration. ~~There was female infanticide,~~ there was and in some cases still is, the practice of the Satī, the burning of the widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands and the lack of education. Though there is nothing of this kind in the older texts, the children

at a very tender age came to be united in wedlock in the late medieval and the only modern period, with all the attendant social evils. If perchance a child has 7 and died, the child wife would have to carry on with her widowhood all her life, a life of utter misery and privation. The widowhood for the women was the greatest curse. They could not remarry and were condemned to a life severe and rigorous. They had to shave their heads, sleep on the floor, eat frugal meals and wear white clothes. Their very sight was considered inauspicious in weddings and other occasions.

That was the position of the Hindu Society till about the middle of the nineteenth century which provided to its observer a very dismal ~~the~~ picture, the picture of a society which through its onward march through history had absorbed into it, inspite of its high philosophy and the most elevating of the thoughts of oneness of all living beings, some of the evils which it was not prepared to shed, the evils which were eating into its vitals and emasculating it. The sap of life which had once made it pulsate with life and throb with inhalation of fresh breath in the ancient and the early medieval period, the breath which had made it a very free society where women would

go out to meet their lovers all alone in the night as described by Kālidāsa, where a wife like Avantisundarī would offer her critical, comments on the works of a great poet like Rājaśekhara, seemed to be running out. The Muslims and the Christian Missionaries taking advantage of the weakness of the Hindu society were getting active in converting Hindus to Islam and Christianity. There were anxious moments around. In those moments there arose among the Hindus crusaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) who persuaded the then British Govt. to ban the hideous custom of Satī, Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) who advocated widow remarriage and the reconversion of the people from Islam and Christianity to Hinduism, the Śuddhi movement as also women's education and carried on a relentless war against idolatry and ritualism while re-establishing the authority of the Vedas against that of the Puranic cults, Maharshi Karve (1858-1910) ~~and~~ a strong advocate of widow ~~the~~ re marriage of which he himself provided an example by marrying a Brahmin widow in the city of Poona, the citadel of orthodoxy in Maharashtra ~~and a the first~~ the pioneer of ~~the~~ women's education in Modern India, the founder of a Women's University ~~by setting up~~,

dispensaries, orphanages, schools, libraries and so on meeting ~~in~~ the Christian Missionaries thus on their own ground ~~and~~ Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) who preached against caste system and ~~against~~ the habit of drinking while advocating the rural uplift of which he took the spinning wheel as the symbol, Ram Krishna Paramahansa (1834-1886) and Swami Vivekanand (1863-1902) who with their order of the Sannyāsins under Rama Krishna Mission Ashram took to serving the poor and the down-trodden ~~and~~ advocating the Vedantic teaching of equality of all beings while emphasizing the nobler aspects of Hinduism weaning away in that manner the people from Islam and christianity and a host of others like Ranade (1842-1900) Gokhale, (1866-1915) Tilak, (1856-1920) and so on who were strong advocates of reform in Hindu Society. In Bengal the movements like the Brahma Samaj and Prarathana Samaj started by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen (- ——————) and in the Punjab the Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayanand did useful work in bringing about awakening in Hindu Society against the evils it had been suffering from and also infused a new spirit of confidence in its glorious heritage and its equally glorious future.

Then there were saints like Tuka Ram in Maharashtra, Shankaradeva in Assam, Chaitanya in Bengal, Nanak and other Gurus in Punjab, Kabir in U.P. who had expressed themselves earlier against caste system and emphasized equal treatment to all beings. The cumulative effect of the social reformers of the nineteenth century and the religious preachers earlier did provide a shake-up to Hindu Society, which got a further fillip through the scientific and technological knowledge. Added to this was the exposure to the world outside. Under the cumulative impact of all the three, the social reform movements, the scientific age and the exposure to the outside world the modern Hindu society with all its tight grip of tradition and history of thousands of years could not but admit of some change to bring it in line to a certain extent with the spirit of the time preserving at the same time its essentials. ~~There~~ is fresh wind noticeable in it. No honest observer can find it the same old decadent society it was in the last century. It has new found confidence in it now. Tradition, though still powerful, has its grip on it loosened percep- tility. With the coming in of the British the Hindus took

to modern education in a big way in contrast to their Muslim brethren who remained backward educationally and are still so.

Women's education which was once almost non-existent or was limited to the upper castes only and there too to learning certain skills and arts, is so wide-spread now that it has belied all expectations. Apart from an all women's university, the S.N.D.T. University in Bombay which was started by Maharshi Karve, as pointed out earlier in Poona in 1916 and which was the first free University in India in the sense that it did not receive any financial grant from the Govt. ~~with just four students,~~ has now more than 5000 students on its rolls in its various faculties of Arts, Commerce and Science. Besides, there are hundreds of Women's Colleges all over the country. Apart from the exclusively women's colleges, which phase is now fast becoming outdated, women students study in large numbers in co-educational institutions. At present the position is that of all the school, college and university going students a fairly large proportion is that of girls. And they are making top grades in them. No longer are some special areas like science and technology the chosen preserve of the boys. The girls have made inroads into them and successfully so.

It is a common sight to see the girls working in laboratories side by side with ~~the~~ boys and discussing problems of such sophisticated nature as Nuclear Physics and Computer Science. The old taboo of women joining certain professions is also no longer there. There are women lawyers, women beaurocrats, women business executives, women financiars and bankers and women in police. The Hindu tradition of the wives of the family not working outside their homes alongwith other men does no longer stand in their way now.

Child marriages are at a discount now. The statuatery age of marriage for the boys is 21 and for the girls 18, which is generally adhered to in urban areas. The only exceptions are the rural areas of some of the more traditional of the Indian States like Rajasthan and ~~Gujrarat~~ Gujarat.

The position of widows too is not as bad at present as it once used to be. They are not the hated lot now even among the uneducation or the less educated. Among the educated the social sitgma is as good as gone. To ~~the~~ the truthful one cannot deny that in spite of all the progress in women's education and social status, women still do not enjoy, thanks to tight hold of tradition, absolute equality with men.

Hindu society does discriminate against them. While the birth of a boy in it is an occasion for jubilation, that of a girl is that of gloom. The pall of gloom is thicker if a female child is followed by many others of her sex. The position is retrieved only with the birth of a male child. This attitude towards girls has its roots in the past. With no old age security from the State, one had to depend upon the family only. Since the daughters are ~~to be~~ given away in marriage and are to become part and parcel of a different household,[1] the family in the case of the aged parents or other elderly relatives signified only ~~the~~ sons and grandsons. Further, due to esoteric beliefs it is the sons who have ~~the~~ are authorized to ~~by to~~ do make offerings ~~have utility~~ at the Śrāddha ceremony, the offerings to the deceased ancien ~~esse~~. The sons obviously are more useful than the daughers. They are also useful in perpetuating families, a duty cast on an adult male by scriptures : prajātantu mā vyavacchetsīḥ, don't snap the thread of a family continuity which he has to fulfil by begetting children repaying thereby the debt to his ancestors, the pitṛṇa. Again, continuity of a feudal society depended on its ability to protect itself against onslaughts of adversaries as also availability of adequate hands for agro-commercial activities.

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1. That is the situation in patriliniar society. In the matriliniar society in the southern state of Kerala the situation is different.

All this accorded to sons in society ~~&~~ a favoured position which continues even with the obsolescence of some of the above considerations, down to the present period. From the very birth girls are viewed as a liability in comparison to boys who are looked upon as an assest. Because of this India has one of the lowest of the sex ratios in the world. The low value attached to girls leads to their neglect. In India, there are 130 million girls below the age of 20. The majority of these are born into an environment in which they suffer from hunger, disease and ignorance. Their neglect is built in the age-old concept of ~~the~~ girls belonging to some one else, their being another's property, artho hi kanyā parakīya eva, as Kālidāsa puts it. From their very inception they are not looked upon as part of the family of their birth. Their going over to another family eventually, after marriage, conditions the entire attitude towards them even at the stage of their upbringing. A Telugu proverb expresses it most effectively : 'Bringing up a girl is like watering a plant in a neighbour's garden'. Added to this is the problem of dowry which is deeply embedded in Hindu psyche and is still prevalent in most parts of India despite stringent legislative measures. The heavy demands of the prospective in-laws years ahead and their insatiable greed, even if the initial demands have been met adequately, further emasculating them

and inflicting misery on their helpless daughter to the point of snuffing life out of her is a sufficient damper on the parents not to aspire for a female child. It is the haunting prospects of raising large sums of money to meet the dowry demands that explains the bizarre behaviour of a Delhi father of two girls, ~~Rakesh Vaishnavi~~, kidnapping one of his own daughters, a three years old girl ~~Gita~~, and abondoning her in Chandigarh as reported in the Press. Even though highly educated and sober, he permitted himself this outrageous act for he was finding it difficult to prepare himself mentally to bring up two daughters, a poignant pointer to the prevailing prejudice in Hindu society against female off-spring.[1]

The female ~~Though female~~ infanticide ~~is no longer the vogue it once used to be, it has resurrected itself in a newer~~ is assuming now a new form and more pernicious form of the destruction of the foetus, if it is that of the female child, on the basis of the determination of the gender of the child, made possible by science even while in womb. This type of female infanticide has shown an unprecendented rise in Indian cities forcing the authorities to think of measures to prevent by law and others means the pre-natal determination of the sex of the child. ~~which has caused several upheavals in middle class families posing a serious urban social problem.~~

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1. Ghai, Anup. Crimes of Passion, The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, September 18, 1988.

The hideous custom of Satī, the burning of the widow in the funeral pyre of her husband, though abolished legally since 1829, raises its head every now and then and is not limited to uneducated poor widows. The latest victim of this, Roop Kanwar of the Deorala village of District of Sikar of Rajasthan, was a graduate girl, educated and brought up in the comparatively modern city of Jaipur. Though the ghastly act on September 4, 1987 had stirred up nation-wide protest and shocked the conscience of the more open-minded of the Hindus, there were thousands, a huge number of them women, who gathered at the place of immolation chanting the praise of the immolated. There were attempts at glorification of the act through a ceremony called the Chunri Mahotsava, the Rajput youths with naked swords guarded the place of immolation, the Sati Sthal. Some even among the political and the religious leaders including the incumbent of one of the most respected of the religious seats of the Hindus, the Shankaracharya of Puri, lent their support to the custom on scriptural authority. The Deorala incident xx made people look around and acquaint themselves with other places like Jhunjhunu where thirteen women had comitted Satī in the 17th century A.D. The event there is celebrated annually on September 10 at the Rani Sati Temple erected at the Sati Sthal. Large numbers of people gather there on the day mentioned above, say prayers and make offerings.

The glorification of Sati has an economic aspect also. Some people have their vested interest in commemoration of the ghastly event. The offerings by large congregations at Sati Sthals are a source of income to their self-appointed custodians. They gobble up large sums and evidently have their own motive in supporting the ghastly custom ~~of Sati~~ and its glorification. Apart from collections, a widow dying may mean one person less to claim a share in the property of the deceased man. Hence the desire of the relatives to get rid of her by burning her forcibly or otherwise along with the dead husband, proclaim her a Sati and impart divinity to her for her supreme self-sacrifice. The helpless widow is then Devi who invites veneration and worship. The existing Anti Sati Act did not have provision in it for preventing the glorification of Sati. Through the efforts of the various women's organizations in the wake of the Deorala incident the Govt. of Rajasthan promulgated the Prevention of Sati Act, 1987 which prohibited it (the glorification of Sati) in the temples to be constructed henceforth. It had no probision in it to prohibit it in the temples in existence already. Accordingly the Rajasthan High Court did not uphold the legislation. The Parliament of India passed the Prevention of Sati Act taking all aspects of the practice of Sati into consideration. The Act got the assent of the President of India on January 3, 1988 and was gazzetted on January 6, 1988.

Every thing said and done, the unpalatable fact remains that neither literacy nor improved career prospects for women have helped raise the status of the female child in the family. It is not only men who can do so, women have also to change their attitude towards the members of their own sex. The demand for dowry, a prime cause for bride burning, does not emanate invariably from only the menfolk but also from women folk. The female in-laws are often guilty of ill-treating the bride for bringing insufficient dowry forcing her to take the extreme step of ending her life or in the alternative to continue to live a life of misery. Of late some women's organizations like Saheli, All India Women's Conference, Manushi, Mahila Janavadi Samiti, the Women's Co-ordinating Council have come into being to help members of their sex in distress. The attitude of men towards women too has undergone some change, helping them a bit to come to their own to occupy their rightful place in society.

At the Governmental level Department of Women and Child Development under the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India has prepared a National Perspective Plan on Women. While dealing with the position of women in present-day Hindu society one thing that has to be borne in minds is that the position varies from region to region. In a

country of the size of India it cannot be hoped to be uniform. In Western and Southern India the position of women is better than in the Northern and the Eastern. The dawry deaths and the Sati incidents are conspicuously absent ~~in them~~ there. Further, women in these parts enjoy much more freedom than their sisters in ~~the~~ those parts even with all the ~~xxxxx~~ entrenched conservatism and orthodoxy.

Untouchability has been abolished under the constitution of India though as a social phenomenon ~~is~~ it still practiced, of course in a much subdued scale, the orthodoxy feeling helpless in upholding it in the present circumstances. In the buses, the railway trains, the aeroplanes and other public vehicles, an orthodox Brahmin may be forced to share the seat with the so-called untouchable, his orthodoxy not withstanding. He may also be forced to buy provisions from the rationshop or the provision store ~~xx~~ owned by someone from the lower caste. He may also likewise have to serve under a lower caste officer who now availing himself of the equal opportunities of education and special concessions in the form of scholarships and stipends as also reservation in jobs may have made it to the top.

As for the caste barriers, the process of industrialization

has contributed not a little to their loosening. The big plants and factories as also giant industries coming up everywhere have brought together large communities of workers and labourers from all castes who live together in big settlements where they cannot hope to keep on exclusively to the customs of their respective castes. The inevitable interaction among them has helped loosen the many barriers among them. The original idea of certain castes holding on to the professions ~~of survival makes them~~ earmarked for them step out of them. For one, the openings are few in their own professions, there may be more in others. With rapid industrialization a Brahmin may find that he can earn much more in a factory or a workshop ~~of~~ or in an office than in a temple or a traditional institution ~~which may earn him only a pittance~~. He may also not find the job satisfaction he may be looking for in his ancestral profession and may like to try pastures anew. It could also be that with the change in the social habits there may not be enough work for him in his ancestral profession. Since the priesthood or teaching in a traditional institution may not carry now the prestige they did earlier, it may not satisfy his ambition and he may opt out for a non-conventional profession. Once out of the confines of his ancestral profession, he may not be in a position to carry ~~out~~ on vigorously with the does and donts of his caste to which heredity ~~ix~~ had conditioned him.

He may be forced to make adjustment in his life style. He can't hope to be the superiority - sporting Brahmin his ancestors were. He is a changed man now. Though maintaining his separate identity and the semblance of caste superiority, he is a changed man, mixing up with the people of lower castes who share with him his profession. To that extent he has shed off the rigidity of his caste and that by sheer force of circumstances.

Since science and technology have brought the world much closer together, there is more of interaction between communities and groups which makes them shed a part of their exclusiveness. The western liberal ideas have also influenced not a little the educated segments of Hindu society in making them more flexible and responsive to new ideas of greater interaction. There is less of discrimination among them consequently against the lower castes.

The practice of untouchability has given a lot of bad name to Hindu society. It is interesting to note in this connection that in India it is not the special characteristic of the Hindu society alone. Other societies too having their quota of it. An overwhelming majority of the followers of other religions being converts from Hinduism, they have carried the practice to their new religious societies

thus divesting Hindu society of the stigma of its sole preserve. T.C. Joseph in his interesting write-up 'On the Other Side of Conversion' in the Hindustan Times[1] makes the point that the Christians of Harijan or Scheduled caste origin who form 75% of the total Christian population of India, i.e., 1.6 crore of the two crore Christians are discriminated against within the Church though according to the Christian religion there is within its ranks neither Greek, nor Jew, nor Gentile, nor slaves, nor free men; rather as far as spiritual membership is concerned, there is not even male or female, all being one in Christ. A Harijan simply acquires equality with a Brahmin because both have gone through a five-minute ritual and have had water poured over their heads. Caste is not skin-deep, its stigma sticks. Nor is rank subdued which is why Christians from among the various castes still like to follow erstwhile demarcations. Rarely is there an inter-caste marriage within the community and a studied segregation is often maintained in Christian settlements, in Churches and even in places of burial when mud should actually be an excellent leveller. And

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1. The national Daily of New Delhi, Sept. 25, 1988

at the higher level, Harijans, in spite of their numerical strength, have no worthwhile representation in the hierarchy. This is all untouchability of sort; and it can rightly be argued that the concept of equality should gain ground within the Church itself among the baptised just as attempts are made to promote it elsewhere. Prior to Joseph, C.S. Jayaram had published his write-up "Dalit Christians Seek Job Quota"[1] which had appeared in the Hindustan Times wherein too the sad plight of the Harijan or Schedlued caste converts to Christianity was bemoaned. According to the writer these scheduled caste Christian converts are deprived politically, discriminated against socially and exploited economically. They continue to be branded as untouchables and even in Christian villages are forced to live in segregated "cheris". Even the benefits of the educational, medical and developmental projects of the Church do not reach the Dalit (Harijan converts) Christians. They are discriminated against from becoming priests, etc. Of the 41 Christian M.P.s there is none from the Dalit Christians. They have organized themselves now into a group and put forward the demand that they be provided with all facilities and special concessions

1. Sept. 16, 1988

including ~~they~~ that they be provided with all facilities and ~~special concessions~~ including job reservations as are available to Hindu outcastes. What is the position with the Christians is also the position with the Sikhs too whose faith does not recognize caste barriers. In actual practice there are acute caste distinctions in Sikh community. Inter-marriages between converts from different castes are few and far between. A Khatri Sikh being of the higher caste would not like in normal course to ~~c~~ marry a Jat or a Mahzabi (Scheduled caste) Sikh. This the Muslims toomay not like to do. Prejudices die hard. They continue to persist even after conversion which is no guarantee to their disappearance. Once confined to Hinduism, they have made inroads into other communities. Caste in a way is an all-India phenomenon rooted deep in the Indian psyche.

There is resistance now in the Hindu society to conversion to Islam and Christianity. The wholescale conversion to Islam of the residents of the South Indian Village of Meenakshipuram had shocked the conscience of the Hindu community and had activated it to do something positive to stop them. Scores of Hindu volunteers had descended on the village to readmit into the Hindu fold people who had deserted it in which they did meet with partial success. Similarly many Hindu organizations spearheaded by the Vishva Hindu

Parishad have become active in foiling the attempts of the Christian Missionaries in converting tribals and other backward classes in different parts of the country. The movement for reconversion started by organizations like the Arya Samaj, after some initial success, have made little hadway, even some of the reconverted not having got the social sanction reverting to their newfound haven of Islam and Christianity. As for conversions there have practically been none, prosylitizing being none of the chracteristics of the Hindu religion,, and the [illegible] of other religions, even the deserters from the Hindu fold being considered as fallen, Mlecchas from which position they can never recover. The Hindu society still is thus a very closed society not admitting easily into it people from other religions.

A development worth noticing in modern Hindu society is the loosening of the family ties particularly in bigger cities and towns. Joint family has been a special characteristic of the Hindu Society since times immorial. Large numbers of family members, father, mother, brothers, their wives and children, unmarried sisters and other family members have been living under one roof sharing the same kitchen. Of late in urban areas families have started fiburcating. Modern education

is to partly to account for this. The modern Hindu young man wants independence for himself, he is more self-centred and wants privacy. His educated wife who is more often than not is a working woman wants the benefit of the earnings of her husband and herself to her own limited circle of her husband, herself and her children only. She has little time and inclination even if she does not have a job, to serve the other members of the family. She is chary of attending on the in-laws and the brothers and the sisters of the husband. The result : The joint family as an essential part of the Hindu ~~ex~~ ethos is under strain now. It has started cracking up. The process is being ~~e~~ accelerated by migration of the family members in search of jobs in other places which comes severely in the way of the family members living together in one place, Since the sons have now started ~~working~~ moving away from their parents and other relatives and have started setting up their separate households, the western phenomenon of the loneliness of the old people has opened up itself to Hindu society too. The concept of the homes for the old in the western sense of the term is new to India though it has been there in the form of the Vanaprasthasrama when the old people would retire to the forest with or without wives after voluntarily renouncing their possessions. The old system no longer holds good now. There are no forests around. Even if there be, people don't

feel like moving into them. They prefer to continue to enjoy the warmth of the family. Now that it has begun to be denied to them, they move into some Asramas in certain religious orders. But there are no organized homes for the old to which they may repair after being neglected and rejected by their children. The social security which had been available to the aged and the infirm in the form of the care bestowed on them by the rest of the members of the family is no longer available to as of them as have their familes (in the wider sense of the term) broken leading to their feeling forlorn and uncared for.

Of the fourfold stages of life as conceived and practised by the ancients, it is only the two, the Brahmacarya, the period of study and the Grhastha, the life of a householder which are the vogue in Hindu society at present.

Very few go in for the Vanaprastha, living away from home alone or with wife, after voluntary renunciation of their possessions and fewer still for Sannyasa, the life of a recluse. They stay on in the families - not a recent phenomenon certainly - the other members taking care of them, looking not only to their physical comforts but also to their emotional satisfaction as well, inculcating in them the sense of belonging, the feeling of acceptance which has an importance of its own in old age. The grandpa and the grandma play

with the grand children, teach them three Rs, tell them stories, derive joy from their small talk and that more than compensates for the infirmities of their age. With the break-up coming in of the joint family this phenomenon is under heavy strain. This is having its impact on the Hindu society in another respect too. Many of the stories from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas and other texts and the Stotras, the devotional hymns the young ones used to learn earlier in their childhood from their grand-parents and other elderly relatives even before their schooling. This kept them in touch with the old tradition which was handed down thus from generation to generation. With the break in the joint family there is break in this too. The new generation of Hindus has little exposure to this knowledge and wisdom and is moving farther and farther away from its tradition which is causing extreme anxiety to elders among them. This phenomenon is much more acute with the Indian immigrants who find their children cut off from their Indian moorings. They want them to know something of the culture of their ancestors, their civilization and religion even while living in an altogether different social and cultural milieu in countries of their adoption where they would have had their birth and upbringing and thus would have had no opportunity of having had a direct contact with India, to keep on with something of their inherited Indianness but more often than not find themselves because of lack of time or their own inadequacy of its pass

proper grasp @ or even arranging for it for lack of right type of teachers with a profound insight into Hindu religion, philosophy and culture.

Since the Brahmin community has now started moving to other professions, the traditional knowledge of the rituals is getting narrower. The reason for this mainly lies in the diminishing of Sanskrit teaching. The traditional Pandits who could officiate at the ceremonies or could perform the Puja are getting scaree. In their absence a phenomenon unthinkable till a few years back of Video Cassets of important ceremonies and Pujas to assist people perform them is making its appearance. Even where the Pandits are available, their performance bedause of ignorance of Sanskrit, quite often they haven't studied it at any stage, is very inadequate. They just perform the ritual, that too perfunctorily and are absolutely in no position to explain it, to an inquisitive modern Hindu who may be keen on knowing its signifiacance as also the meaning of the Mantras accompanying it. There is some thinking on at the moment to start institutions for training Priests and Pujaris to ensure their availability to the Hindu community both of India and abroad. Significant steps are still awaited in this direction which is a matter for concern since the time is fast running out. Some of the organizations like the Arya Samaj are inducti

people from other castes into this profession e when Brahmins are not forthcoming in sufficient numbers for this type of work.

Though this is not peculiar to the Hindus, science, and technology have weakened the hold of religion on society. So have done the exigencies of the modern age. There are more of elderly temple or Arya Samaj going people today than the young ones. The younger generation seems to be distancing itself from the traditional way of life. Given much more to materialistic ways, it has little time and inclination for religious practices which it understands very little, the family and the society having provided him with little exposure to it. This should be a matter for serious concern for the leaders of the Hindu society who need to bestir themselves and do something about it at an early date so that the position is salvaged well in time.

Time was when groups of holy people, the Sannyasins, moved from village to village preaching Dharma and delivering sermons on matters religious. Week-long recitations, the Saptahas, from the Bhagavata were organized, the sessions of stories from old texts were held, and the scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were enacted. This was a regular phenomenon of Hindu life. A break has come in this and the population has little exposure to this a traditional link with

the past. The diminishing of the traditional Sanskrit schools, the Pathasalas and the Vidyalayas, too has played its part in this. The Pandits in these institutions to whom people looked up for spiritual and religious guidance and who were readily available to them in the village are no longer ~~are~~ available to them, the Pathasalas and the Vidyalayas having withered away with students not coming forward to lean Sanskrit, that being too unremunerative to them.

Widow remartiage is still not the prevailing norm. Inter-caste marriages, however, are not that exception now as they once used to be nor do they stir up the protest that they did earlier winning thus grudging acceptance from the Hindu society.

There is a lot of talk now-a-days of Hindu chauvinism. The organizations like the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh and the Shiva Sena are cited as examples of ~~Hindu aggressiveness~~. Being a very sensitive issue it is difficult to comment on it. This seems to be symptom of the developing desire in Hindu society to mark its identity and to make its presence and position felt in Indian polity which it thinks should belong to it for its numerical strength. It also is a sort of reaction to the aggressiveness of the minorities, particularly the Muslims, and the unwillingness of the Hindu majority in its own homeland to be at the receiving end. Some segments - their number is not very large - of the Hindus now

think that enough is enough. The Hindus can no longer afford to take on the aggressive postures of the minorities who have their roots elsewhere and who do not derive nourishment from the cultural soil of the country. This is the psychology behind the concept of Hindu Rashtra. Partly it is the minorities who are to blame for this. Luckily for India Hindu chauvinism is limited only to certain pockets. An overwhelming majority of the Hindus are still ~~unaffected by it.~~ That accounts for the presence in India of large minorities, six million Sikhs, twenty million Christians and one hundred million Muslims, the last ones in such large numbers in spite of their having a homeland for them now for achieving which they had dismembered the country.

Connected with the question of assertion of identity in modern Hindu society is the phenomenon of developing some order in it and not leave it as a conglomerate of sects and faiths with countless splinter organizations and associations for their promotion. The idea is developing now that these organizations and associations should all be brought under one umbrella organization which may look for the welfare of the Hindus in general and not any particular section/ sections thereof. The formation of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, the World Hindu Organization with its branches in 39 countries is a step in that direction. On the regional plane is the Canadian Council of Hindus with its Headquarters in Toronto which aims at federating the various Hindu social and cultural

organizations functioning in 23 cities of Canada at present with certain cities having more than one such organization, the city of Toronto having some fifteen of them. The World Hindu Conferences are now being organized the first one having taken peace in New York, U.S.A. 1986 and the second one in Kathmandu, Nepal in 1988. A kind of new awakening is overtaking the Hindu society with the desire to make its presence felt in the world community. With all its modernity, it still is very much traditional not only in the value system which of course is not bad but also in its beliefs, practices and way of life. It still clings to the past while living in the space age. It has its moorings ~~in its moorings~~ in its thousands of years of history which has given it the resilence to hold on even against the heaviest of the odds. It is responding to the changing times with its core intact which has been its strength down the centuries. It has endless divisions, yet is one, to be designated by the single term Hindu. It is old in maintaining its contact with the Vedic and the Puranic age in prayers, the mode of worship, the pantheon, the ritual, the practices, yet is modern in education, in professions and in its incorporation of the most sophisticated of the industrial and the technical knowhow. With all its contradictions and complexities it is an ongoing society with its rich past and hopefully, an equally rich future.

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HINDU MARRIAGE

-- SATYA VRAT SHASTRI

It is a characteristic of upper class Hindu Society that no individual in it is taken to be already prepared for certain functions in life. He has to be initiated into them. This initiation he has to undergo in a ritual which in the case of some functions is very elaborate and is to be accompanied with the recitation of the Vedic Mantras. A priest well-versed in it has to officiate at it. In the earlier period he used to be a good scholar but things have changed now. The ritual, the Karmakānda, has become a discipline in itself at present and the priests acquiring just the minimum of knowledge and practice of performing the ritual officiate at the cremonies.

The ritual begins even before the birth of a child and continues intermittently right upto his death. The sacraments, the Saṁskāras, needing ritual number as many as forty, of which sixteen are more prominent. Of these sixteen only five are generally practised now : the Nāmakarana, the Christeaning or the naming of a child, the Mundana, the tonsure, the Upanayana the wearing of the sacred thread or the initiation into study; ~~earl~~ the study of Veda and through that of other lores; the Vivāha, the marriage, and the Antyesti, the last rites, the funeral. These five too have now come to be condensed into two, the Vivāha, the marriage and Antyesti, the funeral

which are practised universally - in all upper caste Hindu households.

Before taking up the details of the Hindu marriage ceremony, it would be worthwhile to familiarize oneself with the basic concept underlying the same. Unlike among others, among the Hindus, marriage is not a contract between two parties, man and woman, which could be broken with mutual consent or otherwise. There is nothing like divorce in the sense in which it is understood in Islam and Christianity. The marriage can only be annulled under very special circumstances which have been spelt out in the Smrties, the texts on Hindu law. If the husband suffers from an incurable disease or has been absenting himself from home for a long period with no trace of him or takes to renunciation, Sannyāsa, can his wife, if she so chooses, remarry. Otherwise, man and woman, once tied in nuptial bond, have to remain so all through their life. They have also to be faithful to each other, each looking to the welfare of other. That is the scriptural injunction. Not that there have been no deviations, human society constituted as it is, is not a regimented organism. Even the use of the maximum force cannot make it follow a particular course. Yet, the force of scripture and convention plays its own part in minimising the deviations and directing a society to follow a particular course charted out for it which normally it does with certain exceptions.

It may again be worthwhile to trace here in brief the evolution of marriage in Indian History. The Ṛgvedic Society emerges with a well established home which could not have been possible in the pre-marital stage of sexual relationships. There is no instance of promiscuity proper in the Vedic literature. The only reference to it is in the Mahābhārata. There it is stated that women were in the earlier times free. The custom of marriage was started by Śvetaketu, the Sun of Uddālaka, as stated in the Bṛhadāraṇayaka Upaniṣad.

Since there is no other reference to this nature of marriage in the Ṛgvedic times, a reference to the Purūravas - Urvaśī type of marriage must be supposed to pertain to very ancient times when temporary marriages might have taken place.

A point to be noted before proceeding on with the ritual part of the Hindu marriage is that there is no one stereotyped form of marriage. The scriptures, the Smṛtis, accept as many as eight forms of it; the Brāhma the Daiva, the Ārṣa, the Prājāpatya, the Āsuṭa, the Gāndharva, the Rākṣasa and Paiśāca. The Smṛtis have divided the eight forms into two categories of approved praśasta and disapproved, apraśasta. The first four are of the praśasta category and the last four of the apraśasta one. Of the praśasta too it was the first, the Brāhma which was considered ~~to be~~ the best.

Of the eight forms in the ascending order was Paiśāca, the fraudulent possession of the person of the girl, the Rākṣasa, the forcible capture of the girl while crying or weeping, the Gāndharva, the selection by the bride of the husband for herself, Āsura the acceptance of the bride out of free will by the husband after having paid money to her or to her relations, the Prājāpataya the giving away of the daughter by the father to a suiter on the understanding that they should both perform their religious duties together, the Ārṣa the acceptance by the father of the bride a pair of kine or two for the uses prescribed by law, e.g., the performance of some sacrifice from the 'bridegroom', the Daiva the gifting away of a decorated girl in the form of Dakṣiṇā, the fee at a sacrifice commenced by him, the Brāhma, the giving away of the daughter by the father with such ornaments he could afford to a man of character and learning who is invited by him voluntarily and received respectfully without taking anything in return. Of all ~~of~~ the forms of marriage it is the Brāhma which is considered the purest and the fittest. Most of the rest were social perversities which can go with any society.

At present there is only one form of marriage, ~~the~~ Brāhma, which is prevalent. In some communities the Āsura form of marriage in the shape of acceptance of the

money by the father of the bride from the bridegroom may also be present. One thing that has to be noticed here is that whatever the form of marriage, even the most detestable one of capturing the girl by force, the Rākṣasa form, it cannot be said to have been solemnized unless it is performed in the presence of fire to the accompaniment of the prescribed rites.

The marriage has to be in the same caste but outside the same Gotra, clan. The inter-caste marriages take place. They were only tolerated but not encouraged. An elaborate ritual accomapnies the marriage. A description of it in brief would be worthwhile in bringing to light the thinking that characterizes it, the thinking that shows the highly elevating spirit in which it was conceived.

The rituals in the marriage ceremony can be broadly divided into three :

(i) Kanyā-dāna, i.e. giving away the daughter.
(ii) Lājā-homa, i.e. offering of lājas, parched rice, in sacrificial fire.
(iii) Sapta-padī, i.e., the seven steps around the sacrificial fire.

These three rituals have reference to three persons in the bridal home. Kanyā-dāna is performed by the parents of the bride. The brothers of the bride perform the Lājā

home. The Sapta-padī, by the bride herself. The parents of the girl by their act of Kanyādāna propose the marriage, the brothers by offering Lājā homa second the proposal while the girl by performing the Sapta-padī, the seven step before the sacrificial fire, supports the proposal. The relatives of both sides, the friends and the wise men present by offering and showering of flowers endorse and complete the formalities and requirements of a valid marriage. In such a marriage there is no necessity of any written record. The main witness is the fire god Agni who sanctifies. The other witnesses are the people present. Nothing further is needed for the proof or marriage.

MARRIAGES CEREMONY :

Gods first are invoked and propitiated by means of Vedic mantras. They (the Gods) are requested to grace the occasion by their auspicious presence and become witnesses. Then the bride-groom is honoured by offering of Madhuparka which represents the greatest form of honour in Indian tradition. Then he is offered a seat, water for washing feet and for ācamana (three sips), a pair of clothes and a cow. This depicts the climax of faith of the bride's father in God. In offering the soul in the body of his daughter to the other family the father seeks the refuge of God. Accordingly, acting on the injunction of the Śāstras, he accepts the bridegroom as (a representative of) god and submits :-

'O Great God Thou have appeared in my home in the form of the bridegroom. This girl in the form of Laksmi is thy trust. She is your own and I offer her unto thee ! With these feelings I entrust her unto thy holy hands, pray, accept her'.

The bridegroom eulogizes the things offered by the father of the bride and expresses his gratitude by placing the offered flowers, fruits etc. on his head. In other words the god in the form of the bridegroom expresses his gratification at the devotion of the bride's father and assures him that he would always respect Laksmī in the form of his bride.

The bridegroom takes only a small part of the Madhuparka preparation. He, thereby, fulfils the Ṛig Vedic injunction: Kevalāgho bhavati Kevalādi and the saying of the Gītā aghaṁ te bhuñjate pāpā ye pacanty ātmakāraṇāt, according to which he who eats alone, is a great sinner for he eats an accursed food. He expresses his resolve that in future he shall not eat alone. The Madhu-parka is made up of ghee, honey and curd. Ghee and honey when mixed in equal proportion turn into poison. Accordingly, in preparing Madhu-parka, ghee, honey and curd are mixed in the ratio of 1 : 2 : 4. The utility of ghee, honey and curd is described in highest terms in the Vedas : āyur vai ghṛtam - ghee is verily the long life. Honey is body builder is also praised in ancient texts. Āyurveda

considers curd as the best form of food. The Madhuparka sanctified by the Vedic mantras, is energy - giving and is the best drink. In Vedas ghee is also described as sneha (love). It follows that the love of husband and wife should be as uncorruptible as ghee. The speech of the husband and wife should be as sweet as honey and their thoughts and mind towards each other as pure and clear as curd.

The father of the bride offers four pieces of clothes to the bride-groom. Of these four the bridegroom, hands over two to the bride. This indicates that in future the husband will offer one-half of whatever he obtains to his wife. In asking the bride to wear the two pieces of clothes offered by him, the bridegroom prays in the words of the Mantras that his bride may wear clothes up to a very old age. May she be endowed with wealth, sons and prosperity. May she live a long life and save him from sins. After the body garments are worn, the bride is asked to wear the head garments. At that time the bridegroom says, "The fortunate ladies who have spun and woven it have blessed the bride with long and auspicious life". The remaining two pieces of clothes are worn by the bridegroom with the recital of the Vedic prayers to Indra, Bṛhaspati and gods of the earth and heavens that he may become wealthy, prosperous and long-lived.

i) KANYĀ-DANA :

After the new clothes are worn, the parents of the bride tie the edges of the clothes into a knot and the father taking in his hand the conch, sandal wood, flowers, rice, fruits and water makes a resolve to give the girl in marriage. At that time the family priests of both sides recount the nobility and loftiness of the family of each side, mentioning the names of ancestors, their Vedic pedigree, their Gotras etc. and offer their blessings by reciting bnedictory praises and hymns. The father of the girl hands over the duty of the protection of the girl to the bridegroom. This is a sort of transfer. Amidst the chanting of Vedic mantras, the girl's father by sounding the conch proclaims his purity and integrity. He indicates his large-heartedness through sandalwood, his humility and love and faith through leaves and flowers. The bridegroom desiring the welfare of the parents of the bride by chanting Vedic mantras expresses his devotion to God and his own humility for there is none in the world who gives or accepts. It is God's will alone which accomplishes such a good deed. Reciting the Vedic mantras he prays that that by the subtle influence of the air which sanctifies all the quarters the mind of the bride should follow that of his own and that her soothing sight be

beneficial both to himself and to his cattle. She should always remain cheerful. She may become mother of valiant sons and be the source of happiness to everybody in her husband's home.

ii) LĀJĀ - HOMA (a) :

Marriage is not complete with Kanyā-dāna alone. Before the Lājá-homa, the bridegroom by means of daily sacrificial mantras offers oblations of ghee to the fire and completes the three sacrifices i.e. Rāstrabhṛta for the prosperity of the country, Jaya-Homa for victory and Abhyaṭana for the vanquishing the enemies. He then offers five special oblations in the fire for his own long life and that of the bride and their future progency. After the Kanyā-dāna the feeling may arise in the mind of the bride that both she and her brothers have been born in the same house and both have equal rights, then why is it that she alone is being sent to another family. To unburden her mind of this feeling the brothers give to their sister the Lājās (parched rice) for offering in the fire. The idea is to show that just as paddy plants are transplated from their original places to other places for proper growth of the crop, so also the girls have to be married and transplanted to other families. By filling the hands of their sister with Lājās the brothers assure her that whenever she will go from her father's

home to her husband's home, they will provide her plenty of money and articles. Even now it is considered inauspicious for a married woman to go empty-handed from her father's house to her husband's house.

With these feelings the bride with a pleased mind offers three oblations of the Lājās, parched rice, in the fire through her husband and recites the following three mantras :

Aryyamaṇam devaṁ kanyā agnim ayakṣata, sa no Aryyamā devaḥ preto muñcatu, mā pateḥ.

iyam nāryy upabrūte lājān āvapantikā, āyuṣmān astu me patir edhantāṁ jñātayo mama.

imān lājān āvapamy agnau amṛddhikaraṇam tava, mama tubhyam ca saṁvananaṁ tad agnir anumanyatām iyam.

The significance of the first mantra is that the bride has propitiated god Aryamā and that as she is going away from her father's home to her husband's home, God Aryama may not separate her from her husband's home. In the second mantra she seeks the benedictions of her brothers and relatives for the long life of her husband and in turn wishes them alround prosperity. In the third mantra addressing her husband she says, "Lord, by offering the oblations of Lājās in the fire I pray to God that our mutual love should always remain strong and firm. There is a deep significance in the act of the bride in not

offering the Lājās given by her brothers in the fire herself but through her husgand. Just as at the time of soiwng of paddy, the seed without the husk (outer cover) and the husk without the seed has no utility, similarly in the domestic life the husband without the wife and the wife without the husband has no meaning. Both have to act in concert.

PĀNIGRAHANA (b)

The bridegroom with a happy heart then takes the hand of the bride into that of his hand and assures her :

gṛbhṇāmi te saubhagatvāya hastaṁ mayā patyā jaradaṣṭir yathāsaḥ. Bhago Aryyamā Savitā purandhir mahyaṁ tvādur gārhapatyāya devāḥ. Amoham asmi sā tvam sā tvam asmy amo aham sāmāham asmi ṛk tvam dyaur aham pṛthivī tvam.

Sampriyau rocisṇū sumanasyamānau.

paśyema śaradaḥ śataṁ jīvema śaradaḥ śatam śṛnuyāma śaradaḥ śatam.

"Goddess I hold your right hand in my right one for all times to come. May we live together upto old age. Auspicious gods Bhaga, Aryamā, Savitā and Purandhi have made you the mistress of my house. If I am the breath, you are the speech, but if you are speech, I am the breath.

If I am Sāmaveda, you are Rgveda. I am the heaven and you are the earth. Our minds should be united; our likings should be the same. Loving each other may we see for hundred years, live for hundred years and hear for hundred years."

In the Vedas, the right hand is called Pāṇi, because with it are performed all the religious acts and such other acts as worship, charity, dakṣiṇā, etc. ~~etc~~. Grasping of both the right hands is called Pāṇigrahaṇa. Mutual and lasting love between husband and wife during married life and observing Dharma are the high ideals of Pāṇigrahaṇa.

The highest aim of the husband and wife is attainment of salvation by repaying the three debts, the Ṛṣi Rna, the Deva Ṛna and the Pitṛ Ṛna(i.e. debt to the sages, the gods and the ancestors). The debt to the sages is repayed by the study of the Vedas and the Śāstras and also by acquisition of true knowledge; the debt to gods is repayed by the performance of sacrifices (Yajñas) and the debt due to ancestors is repayed by giving birth to noble progeny.

The bridegroom and the bride then go round the fire four times. In the first three rounds the bride leads and in the fourth one the bridegroom leads. According to Vedic lore attainment of Dharma (duty); Artha (wealth); Kāma

(desires) and Moksa (liberation, i.e. salvation from birth and death) is the aim of life. The bride takes up the responsibility of observing Dharma and so she leads. As dharma cannot be attained without Artha (wealth) the bride comes forward again in the second round for proper utilization of wealth. In the third round the bride again leads, as, for the proper rearing of progeny it is the wife who has to shoulder the main responsibility. In the three rounds she offers Lājās in the fire, grasps the right hand of the husband and steps on the stone. It is on the direction of the bridegroom that she does that. The bridegroom says, "from today onward you may have to face many obstacles and difficulties but you should crush all of them and trample under your feet all those who act as your enemies. You have to remain as firm and steadfast as this stone. In no case have you to falter". Another significance of stepping over the stone is that the path of the married life is difficult to tread. The bridegroom assures the bride that he will fully cooperate with her facing all those difficulties which come in their way. After the third round the bride says that she has taken upon herself the responsibility for Dharma, Artha and Kama and asks :

"Who will take up the responsibility of leading them to salvation i.e. Moksa ?"

Then the bridegroom comes forward and leads in the fourth round. In this round there is no chanting of the mantras. Silence and one-pointedness are the keys of spiritualism which requires introversion.

iii) SAPTA-PADĪ :

The Śāstras do not consider marriage as valid even after the brothers have offered the Lājā-home. Only Sapta-padī completes the marriage ceremony. The consent of the bride is necessary for the completion of the marriage and that is evidenced when they perform the Sapta-padī.

Amidst the chanting of Vedic mantras the bride and the bridegroom walk seven steps before the sacred fire in the presence of the gods, the wise people and the relatives making solemn resolves. This is in consonance with the famous edict, 'Seven Steps taken together creates friendship'. This is the final step in the completion of a valid and legal marriage. At the instance of the bride, the bridegroom takes vows for shouldering responsibility for the provision of food, clothes, strength, wealth, happiness, cattle and other articles necessary in different seasons. These vows he takes in the first, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth steps one after the other and prays to Lord Viṣṇu to grant him strength to fulfil these vows. He addresses the bride as Anna-pūrṇā, Durgā, Lakṣmī, Sukhavarṣā, Prajāvatnī and Rtuvarṣā. In the seven steps

the bridegroom tells the bride : "Come along. Now we are friends to travel this life's journey. Let our love be lasting. As husband and wife let us march on in the service and for the protection of the country, community and dharma, in addition to the service of our parents and relatives. Thus like the two wheels of a chariot, the husband and wife solemnly resolve to shoulder the responsibility of married life and become one in spirit, and pray as under :

I have your heart's support. May your mind follow my mind. May my thoughts and speech be as yours. May God unite me and you firmly in bonds of love for ever.

After the Saptapadī the bride sits on the left side of the bridegroom as ardhāṅginī or vāmāṅgī. At the time of marriage and occasions like Vrata, fast and charity (dāna) as also during the rituals of Puṁsavana (a ceremony performed in the third month of gestation), Sīmanta (a ceremony performed by women in months of pragnancy), parting of the hair and in the course of the Yajñas (sacrifices), etc. wife as a religious partner always sits on the right side of the husband. According to Śāstras the right-side of man and the left-side of woman are considered pure. The right hand of man and the left one of that of woman can in conjunction do all good deeds. On all other occasions such as in chariots, wife is to sit on the left side.

The seven steps, the Sapta-padī, are indicative of the seven Lokas - Bhū, Bhuvaḥ, etc., seven seers (Ṛṣis), seven sounds of music (Sapta-svaras), seven pātāḷs (Sapta-pātālas), seven rays of the sun (Sapta-raśmis), seven colours (Sapta-varṇas), seven corns (Sapta-dhānyas), seven metals (Sapta-dhātus), seven continents (Sapta-Dvīpas), seven mountains (Sapta-parvatas). Then the bridegroom applies sindūra, red powder, in the sīmanta, the parting of the hair of the bride. While applying the powder, the bridegroom prays : May the bride always be auspicious :

sumaṅgalīr iyaṁ vadhūr imāṁ sameta paśyata.

and asks the persons present to bless her before departing :

saubhagyam asyai dattvā yāthāstaṁ vi paretana.

In the end the bridegroom, showing the Polar-star (Dhruva nakṣatra) to the bride and exhorting her to follow steadfastly the family tradition chants the following mantra :

ihaiva staṁ mā vi yaustaṁ viśvam āyur vyaśnutam
krīḷantau putrair naptṛbhir modamānau sve dame

.....

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